



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard 28 October 1999

**APPROPRIATION BILL
Estimates Committee E
Report**

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (12.01 p.m.): I rise to speak to the report of Estimates Committee E, especially as it relates to the portfolio of the Minister for Mines and Energy. I have listened to the Minister's response to the report. However, I say that one of the most disturbing things to come out of the Estimates committee hearing as it related to the portfolio of the Minister for Mines and Energy was the repeated attempts by the Minister to avoid answering questions and being accountable for his actions. Although the Energex fiasco received the most publicity from the hearings, the Minister's repeated refusal to come clean on how he and his Government are operating should have received more publicity.

Firstly, the Minister refused to answer every non-Government question on notice—not just one or two, but the lot. The questions had to be reformatted before the Minister would answer them. No doubt, the Minister was shamed into action and forced to show a little accountability when he woke up that only he and the member for Kedron were attempting to avoid accountability. When the Minister did answer questions, again and again he hid behind the old tired formulas of commercial in confidence and confidentiality clauses.

The member for Gladstone wanted to know about the terms for which energy corporations had signed for Papua New Guinea gas. Quite rightly, she wanted to know whether they were signing up for a competitively priced gas product. I support the Papua New Guinea gas project and this is a fundamentally important question. However, the Minister answered—

"As the terms of the agreements are commercial in confidence and are subject to confidentiality agreements, price and terms of supply are not able to be made available."

In other words, the taxpayers and electricity users of the State are to be kept in the dark—perhaps in more ways than one if this Minister continues to keep deals like this one secret.

The Minister even refused to disclose the amount of mining royalties paid to each coalmine on the basis that it conflicted with section 334 of the Mineral Resources Act. When asked if he had any legal advice to back up that curious interpretation, he refused to answer. He danced around with a few sentences, but would not disclose whether this retreat from accountability was soundly based or just another exercise of ministerial arrogance. When asked what advice from Government owned corporations the Minister had received as to their likely dividend recommendations, which they are required to give to the Minister and the Treasurer by 30 September, he again refused to answer. He said that it would be inappropriate to comment on the figures until the shareholding Ministers made their own decision.

That really sums up our concerns. Firstly, we have a Minister of the Crown refusing point blank to cooperate with the parliamentary Estimates committee and disclose information that he had and that the public has the right to know. Secondly, we have a Minister who makes no bones about his view that it is not appropriate for Parliament or the community to receive information that is not in his interests to disclose. That is another chapter of this Minister's trust-me approach to Government. He gives out as little information as possible, has unfettered powers and treats Parliament with disdain.

The Opposition believes that this Minister's performance at the Estimates hearing was not only substandard but also highlighted a much more troubling dimension of the Beattie Government—a retreat from accountability and a reliance upon corporatisation as a means of hiding critical information from the taxpayers. I would have thought that whether or not a body is corporatised, the ultimate shareholders—and they are the voters of Queensland—deserve some answers and not just a trust-me response from the two shareholding Ministers. It was not just the old chestnut of commercial in confidence that was relied upon. As I mentioned, the Minister would not tell the Queensland Parliament how much each and every mine is paying in royalties. No doubt, the shareholders of these mining companies can and will find out, either in the annual reports of these entities or at their annual general meetings. However, the Queensland public and the Parliament were fobbed off by the Minister.

Finally, this Minister would not disclose what his GOCs had advised were their likely dividends. He did not disclose that because did he not want to. It could have proved embarrassing. It could highlight that he and his fellow shareholding Minister, the Treasurer, intended to rip more money out of them, thereby placing them at a commercial disadvantage and making the task of proactive maintenance all the more difficult.

All in all, it was a disappointing and troubling performance from a Minister, not in a new, open and accountable Government that has nothing to hide and is operating effectively, but in an arrogant and tired Government that, although it has been in power for just one year of its term, is already showing signs of being an administration that is not up to the task and one that will do anything to avoid the glare of accountability.
